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ABSTRACT

The executive director of the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science presents her personal views on changes in the role of the government in information and the changing role of the Commission as reflected in its current and proposed activities. The strengths of the U.S. information community and its position in the international arena are briefly discussed, as well as current information policies that affect the dissemination of information by government agencies. Designed to serve as a resident expert for the federal government, as an "honest broker" bringing together different agencies and branches of the government, as a forum for the library and information community, and as a catalyst, the Commission has set three priorities for 1982: (1) the development of specifications for revised legislation for library and information services, building on recommendations from the White House Conference and the Commission's tark forces on community information and referral services and the needs of cultural minorities; (2) to improve the dissemination of federal information; and (3) to promote the use of the newest technology to improve systems of sharing resources at the national, state, and local levels through networking. (RAA)

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NCLIS IN THE EIGHTIES:

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN U.S. INFORMATION ACTIVITIES

by

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NCLIS IN THE EIGHTIES: THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN U.S. INFORMATION ACTIVITIES

Presented By: Toni Carbo Bearman
10th Annual ASIS Mid-Year Conference
Durango, Colorado
May 14, 1981

With the usual disclaimer that my comments are my own personal view and do not necessarily reflect those of the Commission or the U.S. Government, I would like to talk with you briefly about some changes I see in the role of the government in information and the changing role of the Commission as reflected in our current and proposed activities. I hope you will then ask questions and raise some comments of your own. We should be able to finish closer to 8:30 p.m. than to 9:00 p.m.

You all know that the Federal government is the largest producer and user of information in the country. We sometimes forget that the government is involved in every stage of the information transfer chain--from funding of research to conducting R&D, to gathering data, to authoring publications, publishing journals, books, audiovisual materials, masses of raw data; producing abstracting and indexing services and numeric files; searching databases, operating libraries and information centers, evaluating data, searching files, and using information. Many of these roles have existed since the early 1800's.

The government has interacted with the private sector in many ways, sometimes contracting with private companies and institutions to provide services, sometimes competing with the private sector. Examples such as Congressional Information Service and the Government Printing Office or DUALABS and the Bureau of the Census have been discussed extensively in the literature.

One of the major strengths of the U.S. information community has been its diversity. Last year in England I was asked why the U.S. leads in the information field. My reply was that the crazy mixture of government activities, professional society services, and entrepreneurship somehow works. Two guys can start a small company in their garage and in a few years we find Apple going public with its stock. Or a bright young person gets an idea to repackage information from government sources or discipline-based services and mortages his house to start his company. There are loans from the Small Business Association and information from the government, plus tax incentives, to start a company. Many of these companies are being bought up by larger ones, some outside the U.S.. What impact will these acquisitions and mergers have on information entrepreneurs and on the industry, in general?

Where does the U.S. stand in the international arena? There is a growing sense of isolationism in Washington. We hear talk of pulling the U.S. out of UNESCO; we fight to keep funds to pay dues for U.S. participation in international organizations. Last week two people from Barbados came to our office to discuss how they should set up a national information system for their country. A few weeks ago seven French representatives including a Senator and cabinet minister visited our office as part of a fact-finding tour of the U.S. and Canada. Next week 13 Japanese information specialists will visit us. When was the last time you were part of a U.S.-sponsored fact-finding tour to Japan or France or England? Most developed countries have national

information policies. France and England have cabinet-level ministers for information. Japan, which declares the first week in October National Information Week, is ahead of us in technology. Will we soon be asking Japan to limit voluntarily its export of information products to the U.S.?

Do we need a U.S. information policy or do we need policies for the dissemination of Federal information and for the role of the U.S. in its interactions with other nations. I contend that we do have some policies now. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A-76 speaks very directly to the role of government versus that of the private sector, basically saying if the private sector is doing it the government should not and if the private sector is not doing it, the government should contract with it. A major statement of policy is the Paperwork Reduction Act (P.L. 96-511), probably the most significant piece of legislation in the past 20 years. This brilliantly named Law establishes an Office of Information Policy and Regulatory Affairs in OMB. Although most of the work so far has been on the regulatory side, we are starting to see the impact of the information policy side. This act requires that a single individual be identified in each agency, at the assistant secretary level, to establish and enforce a system for gathering, managing and disseminating information and for overseeing regulatory activities. This requirement is causing major conflicts within agencies. Regulatory issues are usually handled by legal counsel on one side of an agency and information activities are spread across several groups on another side. Guidelines for identifying the single individual will be issued in the near future, and the individuals must be identified by July 1st. OMB is also developing standards for auditing information management activities within agencies. Of course, part of the reason for the act <u>is</u> to reduce paperwork. Specific reductions and time limits are identified in the bill. OMB is not messing around as the support of the Reagan-Stockman budget by Congress demonstrates. OMB recently issued a

directive requiring its approval before any executive agency issued any new serial publication, brochure, or audiovisual material. OMB is clearly working to establish and enforce information policies. Is that the agency we want to have set out policies? Should it be Commerce or Congress? At a meeting in New Orleans recently a government employee told me that information is not a resource or a commodity. Because information is power it is a weapon. I asked him whether he thought the Department of Defense should establish our information policy. Who should set these policies? Do we need a Federal Institute for Information Policy and Research as Congressman Brown proposes?

How is the role of government changing? Clearly, in some ways it is diminishing. The present administration is making major budget cuts in several areas--in education and social programs more heavily than in others. There will be fewer government dollars for R&D, fewer documents issued and published, less funding for arts, education, and libraries. With the increased emphasis on reliance on the private sector we hear talk of contracting executive agency information services to the private sector. There will be fewer Federal employees in general and many fewer at conferences. We may find that the grim reaper cuts so deeply there will be no future harvests. For example, we have some of the most sophisticated weapon systems in the world, yet many people in the armed services are functionally illiterate. If we cut education funds by more than 30 per cent how can we hope to improve the rate of 40 per cent functional illiterates graduating from many urban high schools? Thus, the government's role is changing to a dimished one in terms of funding and to one with very different priorities from earlier administrations.

And where does NCLIS fit into all of this? For those who don't know, the Commission was established in 1970 by Public Law 91-345 as a permenent, independent agency to advise the President and Congress on

policy matters related to the library and information field. We have four major roles:

(1) Resident expert for the Federal Government;

(2) Honest broker, serving to bring together different atencies and branches of the Government;

(3) Forum for the library and information community; and

(4) Catalyst.

The Commission has a staff of nine, and a budget of $695,000.

A clear shift for the Commission has been toward greater attention to the entire library/information field. The Commission has established three major priorities for this year. The first is to develop specifications for revised legislation for library and information services. In 1982, the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) comes up for renewal. Therefore, in line with the many resolutions of the White House Conference on Library and Information Services, and requests from Congress, the profession, and others, we are working to develop specifications for new legislation. We plan to make this topic our first priority. This is an opportunity to build upon the recommendations from the White House Conference and those from our four task forces, especially the ones on community information and referral services and the needs of cultural minorities, to provide specifications for new legislation to meet user needs. It is imperative that this legislation be updated and improved to make it more relevant to current needs and concerns. We are working with the Congressional Research Service on analysis. In addition, the Cultural Minorities Task Force will hold hearings at ALA in June 1981. We are working with Congressman Paul Simon of Illinois to assist with hearings to be held this fall. One will be held in conjunction with the White House Conference Implementation Task Force, named WHCLIST, in Detroit in September. And, finally, in this area, we are cooperating with COSLA and other associations to obtain needed background data.

Our second priority is improving the dissemination of Federal information. Every Federal agency has the responsibility to disseminate information about its activities and to diffuse the results of its research and data-gathering among the people of the United States. This is done now in a variety of ways

which, for the most part, reflect the agencies' missions and responsibilities. As a result, the dissemination and diffusion programs, including the Federal Information Center program, are pretty much stand-alone operations.

To the individual citizen or community group seeking information to answer a problem, there is little chance of finding answers at a single local institution. One solution we are exploring is to strengthen the services of the public library so that it can become known as the local information center. Another is to bring the outreach offices of various Federal agencies and the wealth of material contained in government documents together in the same location, preferably an existing library. Our Community Information and Referral Task Force is exploring this expanded role of libraries. Our Public/Private Sector Task Force has developed a set of principles for the role of government in providing information. Also, we have developed a set of recommendations to the Office of Management and Budget to assist it in implementing the Paperwork Reduction Act, Public Law 96-511. We are also working on projects with the Government Printing Office, the Library of Congress, the National Technical Information Service, the National Archives, and the General Services Administration, serving our role as "honest broker."

The third priority is resource sharing and application of technology. The sharing of resources and the application of technology form a fundamental thread that has run through virtually all of the work of the Commission since its inception, because these two principles form the basis of all contemporary library and information service activities. In order to reallocate Federal, state, and local resources so that they can be used most efficiently, it is essential that we utilize the newest technology and improve systems to share existing resources. The Commission has invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in examining necessary components for a nationwide system to share resources through networking. We have a three-part program in this area: projects with the Library of Congress and the Federal Library Committee, participation on the Network Advisory Committee, and a joint Special Libraries Task Force on the Role of Special Libraries in a Nationwide Network. We also plan to work with the Department of Education and the Library of Congress on a pilot project to encourage national and regional network linking.

Two other major interest areas are international activities, and library and information services to rural Americans.

The Commission presently has four task forces of experts dealing with major areas of national concern relating to library and information services. The Task Force on Public/Private Sector Relations, the Task Force on Community Information and Referral Service, the Task Force on Library/Information Services to Cultural Minorities, and the Task Force on the Role of Special Libraries in Nationwide Networking and Other Cooperative Activities--all of which I have mentioned.

I would like to close by touching on challenges I see for information professionals. First we need to educate members of Congress and their staffs about the important information issues. Fifty-eight senators are serving their first term. More than 240 members of the House have served fewer than four years. With the pressures facing them, few are even aware of information issues. We need to articulate our concerns to them in language they understand, and, if possible, on their home turf--not at hearings in Washington.

Second, we need to stop talking in terms of them and us. There will be fewer resources. If we keep thinking in terms of "those librarians" or "those publishers" we're going to continue talking to ourselves. It is "those librarians" who are providing our products and services to the end user in many cases. And could we also please put to rest this nonsense about what we are called. Does it <u>really</u> matter if we are information managers, information providers, librarians, or information specialists? It's what we do and how well we do it that really determines our image, not the name. I think we should have joint regional meetings with publishers or librarians or archivists, for example, instead of meeting as an information elite of 200 people. More than half of the employed U.S. population works in information-related fields and our membership remains stagnant at roughly 4,000. Doesn't that tell us something?

Third, and finally we need to confront some of the major issues in our field and devote our energies to them rather than to our internal organizational problems. I would love to see an ASIS conference at which no member of Council went to a single committee meeting but instead participated in discussion sessions on such topics as: "How do we develop networking systems to serve the users instead of librarians?" Or, "How can we overcome barriers to facing the fee versus free issue" or "How should we design a graduate program to prepare information managers for the next 20 years," or "How can we combat censorship and other barriers to intellectual freedom?" It is not a question for ASIS of whether we have the right balance of academics versus practioners or do we have too many librarians? Rather, it is a question of how do we as professionals focus on the substantive issues of today and what can we do about them?

At an AAP meeting last week I listened for the shortest hours of my life to a man named Timmerman who thanked AAP for helping to get him freed from prison where he had been incarcerated and tortured for 30 months, because he published a newspaper and books considered subversive. At this meeting I have listened to discussions of whether we have too many SIG's and how we can improve our indexing and cataloging processes. I am not saying we should politicize ASIS, I am saying that we, as individual professionals, need to re-examine what it is we are trying to do. I hope that you will think about some of the questions and issues I have raised.

Thank you for your attention.

1 June 1981